

# United under One Banner?

## Medievalism and 'National' Memory in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Switzerland and Britain

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### Project Contents and Goals

Reimaginings of the Middle Ages (so-called 'medievalisms') play a pivotal role in present-day negotiations of national identity in Switzerland and the United Kingdom. In order to account for the fragmented, often ambivalent and occasionally questioning presence of the Middle Ages in contemporary discourses of national identity, this project treats medievalism as part of the cultural memory. Accordingly, the project is not concerned with debunking 'falsehoods', but with the ways in which the medieval past is adapted to speak to the present in the cultural,



social and political contexts of Switzerland and the UK. The 'national' medievalisms of these cultures have followed largely independent trajectories, yet they exhibit similarities in content and function (e.g. ideals of liberty from tyranny, republican traditions and staid exceptionalism in a European context, but also the structural marginalisation of women). This is not to insinuate homogeneity between Swiss and British medievalism – indeed, they are far from monolithic even 'internally', reflecting, in both cases, a plurality of constituent cultures. Rather, the question is *how* and *why* medieval(ist) material is being used as a privileged locus in these different yet comparable narratives of national identity.



### Sources

Cultural memory confines itself to no particular medium. Nevertheless, while medievalism is highly adaptable medially, its specific medial manifestations are far from interchangeable. The project privileges literary, dramatic, film and television medievalisms, but also includes examples from other media and across discursive fields to offer a fuller account of twenty-first-century 'national' medievalism. Examples include comic books, adverts, newspaper articles, re-enactments and commemora-



tive festivities. The often implicit political nature of 'national' images of the Middle Ages precludes any rigid distinction between political and cultural medievalism, as was demonstrated e.g. by the extensive commemoration of Magna Carta in Britain and the public debate of the Battle of Marignano in Switzerland throughout 2015. Scholarly literature, too, becomes the object of study here whenever it injects itself into the ongoing debate of the place of medieval history and memory in Swiss or British culture, society and politics.



### Methodology

Even the most recent medievalisms have a latent greater diachronic dimension to them. Using a transtextual, adaptation-theoretical model, this project approaches medievalism as a 'palimpsest' of medieval, medievalist and presentist textual layers (of varying prominence). Consequently, the contemporary sources open up entire histories of earlier medievalisms – which cannot possibly be traced in their entirety, but aspects of which crucially inform our understanding of today's 'national' Middle Ages. With the narrative medievalisms given priority here, two different heuristics elucidate the relationships between present and past put forward in medievalism. On the one hand, the Middle Ages



are 'told' in three "narrative modes" (Valentin Groebner) that centre on continuity, alterity, or emotional identification, respectively. On the other hand, memory of the Middle Ages takes shape between the poles of 'history' and 'myth' (Stephanie Wodianka), poles distinguished by different constellations of the relative cognitive 'distance' of the remembering subject to the object of memory, to the process of remembering, and to other remembering subjects. Close readings of the primary sources thus shed light on the manifold ways in which the Middle Ages are (dis)claimed as 'ours' in nation-building on either side of the Channel.

